

American

NEWS & VIEWS

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Dreaming of a Green Christmas

By Karin Rives
Staff Writer

Washington — Why cut down a perfectly healthy tree and adorn it with glitter and decorations only to throw it out a few weeks later? Why waste all that paper on gifts and cards?

In this climate-change conscious world, there is now something called a holiday carbon footprint. One British study found that households generate an additional 650 kilos of carbon dioxide during Christmas.

The winter holiday season in the United States and much of the Western world is about family, community and tradition. In recent years, many people have chosen to add a shade of green to their Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa or other year-end festivities.

Tammy Wilson, the owner of EarthLover Shopping, an online retailer in Georgia, has noticed that people who call to place orders no longer treat environmentally friendly products as an oddity. Environmental values, she said, are becoming mainstream values.

"A year ago, they would say 'I have a cousin in California who's all into ecofriendly products, I need to find a gift for my cousin.' Or 'I have this friend who only wants green gifts,'" Wilson said. "I haven't heard a single person say that this year. The rest of the world is coming on board."

EarthLover Shopping has doubled its holiday sales this year, sending out about 50 packages daily — often in reused boxes — to customers in the United States and Canada. Many are asking for fair trade products that are also environmentally friendly. "We're wrapping night and day," Wilson said.

At TerraPass, a San Francisco-based company selling carbon offsets, the big thing this year has been electronic Christmas cards. They sell for \$5.95 and come with a minimum offset of 454 kilos of carbon dioxide, a prominent contributor to climate change.

People who buy the cards automatically channel money into projects that TerraPass is supporting, such as wind-energy farms and landfill methane capture initiatives that help reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Such offsets may give TerraPass customers some peace of mind when they fly across the country to join family for the holidays or drive around town searching for holiday gifts.

"Our other popular product is our climate change chocolate, which makes for great corporate gifts and is

always in high demand this time of year," said Lauren Rosenberg, a TerraPass employee.

The \$5 chocolate bar comes with a carbon dioxide offset of 60 kilos, but this treat is rarely shipped internationally as it would result in added emissions from the transport, she said.

INCORPORATING "GREEN" THEME IN HANUKKAH

Holiday green isn't just about shopping.

Rabbi Arthur Waskow at the Shalom Center in Philadelphia urged members of the Jewish community to take action "to heal the Earth from the global climate crisis" during Hanukkah. For the past four years, he has dedicated each of the eight days during the Jewish Festival of Lights to an energy-saving action.

According to the story of Hanukkah, oil expected to last one night miraculously lit the Holy Temple for eight days. "That one-for-eight has become a central theme for conserving energy," Waskow said. "This idea really picked up after Al Gore wrote his book [about climate change], *An Inconvenient Truth*."

Many synagogues nationwide are now using the Shalom Center's "Green Menorah Covenant" to remind members to save energy during the holiday, he said.

A GREENER CHRISTMAS TREE

This is also the second year that the National Christmas Tree on the White House lawn in Washington is illuminated by light-emitting diode (LED) lights. These energy-saving lights have cut the tree's power consumption from 50,000 watts to 7,000, according to the U.S. National Park Service, which manages the site.

The tree was shipped from North Carolina, several hundred kilometers south of the nation's capital. Some Americans, however, have decided that the practice of cutting down a tree to celebrate Christmas contradicts their wish to lead a more sustainable life.

These ecoconscious citizens have found a compromise in Christmas tree rental services, which are now cropping up on the West Coast and spreading east.

The Living Christmas Company, based in the Los Angeles area, is one of them. The tree rental service was started in 2008 by an entrepreneur who has seen rentals soar from 100 to 1,200 trees in just two years. The Living Christmas Company delivers the tree to the room where it's supposed to stand, and picks it up after the holidays.

Founder Scott "Scotty Claus" Martin, a landscape

designer by trade, said he got the idea for a rental service when delivering Christmas trees for a local nursery during his college years. It saddened him to see young trees thrown out after just a few weeks, he said.

The tree rental, a side business for Martin, received twice as many customer requests for trees than there were plants available this year. He now employs 25 seasonal workers and plans to expand his business into new communities in 2011.

"People love renting them," he said of his trees. "It's a win-win for all. We can continue this rental service and they get to enjoy the same tree ... year after year as part of their holiday tradition."

Russian Ministry Hosts U.S. Student Body Presidents in Moscow

By Sally R. Rountree
Staff Writer

Washington — Student body presidents representing U.S. colleges and universities across the United States went to Russia in November to meet their counterparts in what many officials and academics hope will be the first of many such exchanges in coming years.

It was the first fully funded program sponsored by a Russian governmental agency to bring American students to Moscow under the auspices of the U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission's Education, Culture and Sports Working Group.

The Russians sought to "identify the future leaders of America and acquaint them with Russian culture," according to Chang Suh, director of the Open World Leadership Center, who assisted in organizing the visit that included meetings with prominent Russian government and business leaders. Recognizing that several former presidents of the United States were once college student body presidents — including Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton — the Russians wanted those who might be future leaders to visit Russia now, Suh told America.gov.

"The president of the student community in U.S. universities [is] not only an influential figure, but also promising," the Russian newspaper Izvestia wrote November 19 about the American delegation. "They often form the core of the elite of American society."

Mark Gul, the Bilateral Presidential Commission coordinator at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, said he hopes that this will be the first of many exchanges of this type. It is "a great example of the spirit of partnership that has been made possible by the reset," Gul said.

The commission, created in 2009 by Presidents Obama and Dmitry Medvedev, has established 18 working groups that seek new opportunities for partnerships and exchanges between the two countries to improve mutual understanding and cooperation.

The trip was sponsored by the Russian Ministry of Youth in cooperation with the U.S. Library of Congress' Open World Leadership Center. The 15 student body presidents came from Amherst College, Barnard College, Columbia University, Dixie State College, Georgetown University, Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Snow College, Stanford University, University of California at Berkeley, University of Colorado, University of Massachusetts, University of Minnesota, Utah Valley University, and Westminster College (Utah). They represent a diverse college population of more than a quarter of a million students from throughout the United States.

The trip sought to encourage civic engagement among students, leaders and citizens of the two countries. Their weeklong visit included meetings with Vladislav Surkov, President Medvedev's first deputy chief of staff; Svetlana Zhurova, vice-speaker of the State Duma; Vladimir Slesarev, deputy chairman of the Supreme Commercial Court; and Vladimir Baranovsky, deputy director of the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO).

The students also met with Viktor Vekselberg, president of the Skolkovo high-tech research and production hub (Russia's "Silicon Valley") and chairman of the board of the Renova Holding Group, representatives of Russia's young innovators network "Futurussia," and fellow student leaders from Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), Moscow School of Political Studies, and the Bauman Moscow State Technical University.

After visiting the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and sessions with senior diplomats and Russian journalists, Georgetown University student president Calen Angert admitted, "I did not expect our Russian contacts to field our questions so directly. The acknowledgment and candid discourse during these meetings helped transform my view of Russia from a Cold War carryover to a developing democracy."

Several of the students said the trip might have influenced their career paths. Utah Valley University student president Richard Portwood is beginning Russian language lessons, and Georgetown's Angert is now considering working in Russia.

"While the possibility would not have been on my radar before this trip," Angert told America.gov, "I can now see

the immense opportunity there. The Russian market is quite viable, and I would certainly consider starting a business there someday."

Added Portwood, "Our visit showed us the incredible potential for future U.S.-Russia collaboration."

Following the trip, Vladislav Surkov said in an e-mail to Portwood, one of the student organizers, "Your willingness to maintain contacts is of great importance to us. We are prepared to do all we can for you to come to Russia more often and to regard our country as a platform for cooperation. Russia's Federal Youth Agency and I personally will support all of your efforts and projects aimed at making both of our countries closer to each other."

"Today's young leaders will shape the future of U.S.-Russian relations," UC-Berkeley student body president Noah Stern said. "Personal relationships, constant communication and a propensity for dialogue will ensure decades of effective partnership."

Statement on Belarusian Elections and Political Violence

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary
December 20, 2010

Statement by the Press Secretary on Belarusian Elections and Political Violence

The United States strongly condemns the actions that the Government of Belarus has taken to undermine the democratic process and use disproportionate force against political activists, civil society representatives and journalists, and we call for the immediate release of all presidential candidates and the hundreds of protestors who were detained on December 19 and 20. The United States cannot accept as legitimate the results of the presidential election announced by the Belarusian Central Election Commission December 20. We regret, as the OSCE's election observer mission assessment made clear, that limited progress in the political environment prior to yesterday's elections did not lead to a free and fair outcome or a transparent vote count. We are also concerned by indications that independent internet media have been disrupted and call on the Government of Belarus to take measures to protect its citizens' right to free media. As we reiterated in the U.S.-Belarus Joint Statement of December 1, the further development of relations is contingent upon the Government of Belarus's respect for human rights and the democratic process. The actions taken over the last 24 hours, however, are a clear step backwards on issues central to our relationship with Belarus.

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